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ABSTRACT

Sixteen rural K-12 regular education teachers from West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania completed a certification program focusing on inclusive practices for successful integration of special education into regular education classrooms. Data on competency acquisition and use were collected prior to participation and 6 months following completion. Eleven participants rated their comfort level in the use of seven instructional and behavioral techniques: curriculum-based assessment, cooperative learning, student self-management, peer tutoring, direct instruction, strategy instruction, and goal setting for students with learning disabilities (LD). Significant gains were reported for all but strategy instruction. Eleven participants were asked the degree to which they could establish positive strategies for students with varying learning styles, analyze materials according to appropriateness for students with LD, develop lesson plans to assist students with LD, respond appropriately to learning needs of students from different cultures and backgrounds, develop intervention plans for deviant behaviors, identify specific teaching materials to meet the needs of students with LD, and develop a schedule that allows them to work effectively with the variety of students in class. There were significant gains in all areas except the last. A program evaluation questionnaire completed by six participants found that the most frequently cited instructional impacts were in cooperative learning and peer tutoring, evaluation methods were greatly impacted, participants appreciated the cohort structure, and academic and social benefits were realized for students with and without LD. (TD)

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RURAL GENERAL EDUCATORS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION TRAINING: APPLIED ASSIGNMENTS & PROGRAM EVALUATION DATA

Introduction

It is imperative that general education teachers be prepared to facilitate and provide appropriate instruction for students with learning disabilities in inclusive school settings. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 stipulate that students be removed from general education programs only when the nature or severity of their disability is such that education in general education classrooms, even with the use of supplementary services, cannot be achieved satisfactorily. More than 80% of the over 5.6 million 6-21 year old children and youth currently identified as having disabilities in the United States are being taught in general education settings. Some 41 % of these spend their entire school day in general education classes; another 39.6% are enrolled in these settings on a part-time basis (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). The percentage of children with disabilities attending general education classes has increased every year since the inception of The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1975, and by all indications, this trend will continue.

IDEA Amendments (1997) specify that effective and efficient training models be developed that prepare general education personnel to acquire the collaboration skills necessary to work within teams to assist children with disabilities, and to achieve results that meet standards within the general education curriculum. A workable model provides a comprehensive, organized way to develop and maintain an integrated, caring, and inclusive school community. An "inclusive school" is one in which all children with disabilities: 1) attend the neighborhood school they would attend if they had no identified disabilities, 2) the percentage of students with disabilities in a given classroom does not exceed the proportion of those students in the general population (principal of natural proportions), and 3) all supportive services, which would be available to the student in a special education placement, will be available in the general classroom. Research regarding collaborative skills indicates educators engaging in collaborative processes are likely to benefit from a host of skills clustered in several areas that include communication, inter-personal problem-solving, instructional strategies, assessment knowledge and techniques, providing accommodations and modifications for curriculum access.

Although inclusion calls for a "shared ownership" approach to educational problems of students with identified needs through a partnership between general and special education, it makes increasing demands on general educators to assume responsibility for the learning of students with disabilities and students at risk. It requires an effective support system, which may not be in place in many educational settings. For special educators, inclusion requires skills in effectively interacting with other professionals and sharing responsibility for students once considered "theirs." For general educators, it requires active

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participation in developing and implementing programs for students with disabilities and an increased willingness to open their traditionally private classrooms to special educators. Inclusion, therefore, creates a need for communication, coordination and collaboration among a total school staff that has access to materials and methods to enable them to implement responsible inclusion. Professional skills to promote the development of mutual respect and support, for establishing a collaborative and sharing atmosphere, and facilitating a team approach to instruction and planning have been identified as professional development needs.

Provisions for an appropriate education for children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment continues to challenge rural schools. In West Virginia, approximately 90% of students with disabilities are placed either full-time or part-time in general education. These data suggest that ways must be explored to serve students with disabilities more effectively and efficiently through shared problem ownership, collaborative consultation, and teaming. State Policy 2419, Regulations for the Education of Exceptional Students (WV Department of Special Education, 1995) state that a full-time general education placement for children with disabilities requiring classroom modification be implemented through consultative services between general and special education personnel. Many schools are trying to adopt a collaborative consultation model to facilitate inclusion but report they have no faculty trained in the process nor having knowledge of how to plan and implement inclusive practices school-wide.

LD Inclusion Training Program

IDEA Amendments of 1997 prioritize personnel preparation for interdisciplinary teaming with parents, students, agency representatives, and key community persons to ensure smooth transitions for students with disabilities 20 USC 1474(b)(3)(A). Interdisciplinary coordination requires skills that include assessment of students needs for community services and transition supports, and developing a sequential action plan for services delivery by multiple agencies and key community persons. IDEA prioritizes the need for educating general education personnel to meet the needs of children with disabilities. This training program prepared rural general education teachers to serve students with LD. The program delivered coursework using an immediate theory to practice approach. A distributed practicum directly in the general educators' rural inclusive classroom included technical assistance while modeling immediate instructional problem solving. Emphasis was placed on specific preparation in instructional strategies and behavioral interventions.

One of the tasks outlined in IDEA Amendments of 1997 is to develop national guidelines for alternative assessment for those children who are determined not to be able to participate in or benefit from general assessment procedures 20 USC 1474(b)(3)(A). Conceptual and structural analysis of different modes of assessment such as curriculum-based, out-come-based, functional, dynamic, ecological assessment, and socio-behavioral assessment were targeted in four modified core required courses. In addition, uses of various modes of assessment were incorporated in three newly developed inclusion modules. Students were required to refine assessment procedures and techniques in course assignments based on the performance of individual students with learning disabilities included in their classes. Improving the assessment knowledge and skills of general educators was anticipated to have a direct effect on the problems related to identification of children as having learning disabilities.

Inservice training has been the primary method used to train special and general educators for inclusion in West Virginia. Unfortunately, the goals of inservice training sessions typically are directed toward awareness and knowledge (Dettmer, Thurston & Dyck, 1993). The LD/Inclusion program provide instruction directed at developing skills/competencies to effectively and appropriately integrate students

with learning disabilities in general education settings. A variety of methods and materials were employed to facilitate the development of competencies of trainees. The program applied the principles of competency-based personnel preparation which allows for individualization to meet specific needs of trainees and their teaching environment (Blackhurst, 1977). Competency-based learning helps focus learning and thus results in better retention and application of the skills (Kulic, Kulic and Bangert-Drowns, 1988). Case studies were used to bridge the gap between the "what to do" and "how to do" of inclusion practices. This provided teachers a process and opportunity to refine and practice skills to analyze situations and make judgments (Shulman, 1992; Silverman, Welty & Lyon, 1992). Applied assignments combined academic knowledge and skills that enable trainees to learn by doing (McKeachie, 1994). Two forms of field-based instruction were used: 1) coursework combined with on-the-job application, and 2) practicum assignments in which field experiences are incorporated into Module lectures and discussions.

The participants completed a certification program of 24 hours that included 12 hours of special education core courses (Introduction to Special Education; Curriculum and Methods for Special Education; Assessment; and Classroom and Behavior Management) and six (6) hours of specialized courses including an introductory course addressing characteristics of students with Learning Disabilities, a strategies course, and a modified, innovative six (6) hour on-the-job practicum experience. This program was anchored to a common thread of competencies focusing on inclusive practices necessary for successful integration of special education.

The participants also completed a series of three Inclusive Schooling Modules and a Leadership for Planning Rural School Inclusion course. Competencies for the modules were derived from an extensive review of literature of best practice indicators for inclusion. Module I (Inclusive Schooling Issues and School Teams) examined practical, ethical and theoretical issues related to inclusion and the principle of least restrictive placement of students with disabilities. Module II (Assessment and Teaching Strategies for Use in Integrated Classrooms) targeted competencies related to teaching students in general education classes and activities involved developing, implementing and evaluating educational and environmental adaptations to meet the varied needs of these students and others, which may be considered educationally, at-risk. While traditional methods courses in special education focus on strategies for teaching special education students in more restricted, small group formats, this module targeted their application within the context of the varied population and large group format of general education classes and activities. Module III (Inclusive Schooling Models and the Change Process) examined a variety of inclusion models to facilitate integrated/inclusive practices. Module III primary objectives were to make use of workable ideas already developed and to study change agents involved, including their success or lack thereof. The three Modules were delivered to trainees in sequential order and simultaneously with certification coursework.

Trainees

A total of twenty teachers began the training program with sixteen successfully completing all requirements. Trainees were from schools within the state of West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. All participants were employed general educators in rural schools districts. At least three identified students with learning disabilities were on the class roster of every teacher. The eleven of sixteen trainees completed and returned the Comfort Level Rating Scale and the Assessment of Skills for Teachers instruments. The eleven teachers ranged in age from 24 to 54 with a mean of 41.8 years. Years teaching ranged from 1 to 31 with a mean of 11.4 years. Seven participants taught at the elementary level (grades 1-4), five at the middle school level (grades 5-8) and two at the secondary level (both grade 12). Six of the eleven participants completed and returned the Program Evaluation Questionnaire.

Data Collection

Data on competency acquisition and use were collected from participa 's prior to participation in the program, and then six months following program completion. Instruments used included a Comfort Level Rating Scale, an Assessment of Skills for Teachers, and a Program Evaluation Questionnaire developed by project staff. The questions focused on what impact the program had on the participants' teaching, and ultimately on the special education students in their classrooms. Participants were also asked to cite specific components of the program they felt had the greatest impact on their professional development. Finally, participants were asked to provide examples and evidence that supports the stated impact(s).

Preliminary Findings

The preliminary findings from a sample of participants for which complete data are currently available are reported in this document. At the time of this writing, eleven of sixteen participants returned the Comfort Level Rating Scale and the Assessment of Skills for Teachers instruments. Six of sixteen participants returned the Program Evaluation Questionnaire. A comparison of pre and post program participation scores on the Comfort Level Rating Scale and the Assessment of Skills for Teachers instruments is summarized below. Pre and post scores on the Comfort Level Rating Scale and the Assessment of Skills for Teachers instruments were analyzed by computing paired t-tests. Preliminary findings based on the responses to the Program Evaluation Questionnaire are discussed as well.

Comfort Level Rating Scale

The Comfort Level Rating Scale is a 6 point likert scale instrument. Participants self-rated their comfort level in the use of seven instructional and behavioral techniques (curriculum based assessment; cooperative learning; student self-management; class wide peer tutoring; strategy instruction; direct instruction; and goal setting for students with LD). There were statistically significant gains ($p<.01$) in the rating scale score for six of the seven techniques listed on the Comfort Level Rating Scale. The six techniques for which there were statistically significant gains ($p<.01$) are curriculum-based assessment, cooperative learning, student self-management, class wide peer tutoring, direct instruction, and goal setting for students with LD.

Assessment of Skills for Teachers

The Assessment of Skills for Teachers is a 5 point likert instrument that lists seven skills related to teaching students with disabilities. Participants self-rated the degree to which they could demonstrate each specific skill listed. The instrument asked if the participants the degree to which they could: 1) establish positive motivational strategies that can be used with students with varying learning styles; 2) analyze materials according to appropriateness for student with learning disability; 3) develop lesson plans to assist student with learning disability; 4) develop a schedule that allows teacher to work effectively with the variety or students in classroom; 5) respond appropriately to learning needs of students from different cultures and backgrounds; 6) develop intervention plans for deviant behaviors; and 7) identify specific teaching materials to meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. There were statistically significant gains ($p<.01$) in the rating scale score for all the items listed on the Assessment of Skills for Teachers, except on the 'develop a schedule to that allows teacher to work effectively with the variety of students in classroom' item.

Program Evaluation Questionnaire

Responses on the Program Evaluation Questionnaire indicate the training impacted unit and lesson planning with regards to inclusion students with learning disabilities. The immediate benefit for students was evident. As one teacher put it, "I can see that modifying does make a difference because the students grades have improved overall. Lesson plans and units include modifications. Previously they usually weren't very detailed."

Changes in behavior management approaches and student gains were also a common theme on the Program Evaluation Questionnaire. Many very specific testimonials were provided. One teacher offered the following: "By simply using positive reinforcement I was able to see an LD student in my class improve from an 'F' in math to a 'C.' I praised and encouraged her constantly and her whole attitude towards math changed. The class that she hated at the beginning of the year became her favorite subject at the end."

The most cited instructional methods impact was in the area of cooperative learning and peer tutoring. Every teacher indicated an increase use of cooperative arrangements. Every teacher reported student gains in learning and/or behavior as a direct result of implementing various cooperative/peer techniques. A middle school teacher summed it up this way: "In a class which was very uncooperative, I decided to try to use cooperative learning groups. Although the planning was ridiculous, the class responded really well."

Assessment and evaluation methods to evaluate student learning were greatly impacted for all teacher participants. "I never felt comfortable modifying assignments and tests until taking these classes. Several things like modifying test instructions, reading tests aloud, highlighting material, and giving oral tests have all been very helpful..." is a common theme reported by the teachers. The use of advanced organizers was the most cited impact in the area of curriculum and material modifications. There was only a marginal impact in the area of learning strategies. Most teachers felt the program validated the learning strategies instructional practices they were already implementing.

Finally, participants were asked to identify the components or aspects of the LD/Inclusion Program that were most valuable. The Curriculum and Methods for Special Education, Classroom and Behavior Management, and the Inclusion Modules were cited as most beneficial. The teachers also appreciated the Cohort structure. "Being part of a great group of people was helpful. We bonded and helped each other. Many of us (I for one) probably couldn't have done it without that support."

Summary

The LD/Inclusion training program increased the knowledge and skills of general education teachers in several domains. Participants improved skills and competencies needed to facilitate and implement responsible inclusive schooling practices in rural settings. The most influential components/coursework within the program had field based assignments that teachers carried out in their respective schools. Ultimately, academic and social benefits were realized for students with learning disabilities as well as their non-disabled peers.

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